



Just Four Minutes

It is spring, and time once again to run the ruffed grouse drumming routes on Chippewa National Forest. The route begins about sunrise, which means you will arrive just in time to catch the sun play on the tree tops, bringing that lovely, rosy glow to the red pine. From there it is a simple matter of stopping every mile for ten miles, exiting your vehicle, and just listening for the next four minutes. The listening is supposed to be about hearing the beat of the male grouse's wings, as he seeks to woo the ladies. The bird beats his wings against the air, creating a vacuum and producing the drumming noise. Each set of drums is recorded, and provides a yearly index to ruffed grouse populations.

It is easy enough; yet so hard not to get wrapped up in the magic of all the rest of what happens during this brief time. At the second stop, sandhill cranes begin to call from a wetland just south of the road. The crane's call is ancient; a loud, rasping gurgle. One of my very favorite routes, this particular road really highlights some of the variety of habitats that can be found on the Forest. Pine islands rise above the spruce swamps, lakes glisten in the sun, aspen cutovers favor grouse, and beaver ponds dot the landscape.

In places, the road is barely perched above the water. Unseen, mallards quack amongst the cattails somewhere beyond the beaver dam, until 3 birds jump into the air. The chase is on, the hen flying hard with the drakes in hot pursuit. Mating flights are full of drama.

This fine spring day, the woods are coming alive with color. A few fresh, pale green leaves show on some of the aspen. Catkins hang from the alders, soon to release their pollen. And the pinkish-red of the maple is something to behold. Have you ever paused long enough to examine a red maple flower?



In between stops, I play hide-and-seek with a northern goshawk. This bird is doing his hunting road-side this morning, but you can see that my presence is cramping his style. He pushes along in front of me, and finally breaks off into the woods.

The next stop brings that unmistakable, French horn note that can only come from a Trumpeter swan. These wetlands provide homes for any manner of waterfowl. Wood ducks squeal as they fly over. It's hard to hear the grouse over the incessant honking of geese. Just 25 years ago it was rare to find a Canada goose on the Forest, there were no cranes here, and reintroduction efforts were underway for the swans.

When it comes to grouse, stop number four has got to be my favorite. There it is the drumming log is so close to the road, you hear the whoosh of the air as he beats his wings. So close, one is tempted to take a peek at the bird. I ventured a little off the road, and found a big log covered with feathers. Perhaps our goshawk has dined here. The drumming log itself is mossy, well concealed within the dense growth of regenerating aspen and mountain maple.

A little further down the road, a dispute between two red squirrels catches my eye. They are squabbling over the rights to an oak tree, where they are feeding on tiny leaves as they burst their buds. The four minute listening point is long enough to watch a downy woodpecker work his route, flying from snag to snag where he drums in his own way as he pounds the snag, proclaiming the boundaries of his place in the woods. In the distance, I can hear a snipe. I can't see it, but I know it is a male doing his winnowing display. He flies high in circles, making shallow dives causing his tail feathers to vibrate, producing yet another kind of drum.

Chorus frogs call from the water beside the road, but fall silent as you pull over to stop. You know these frogs because they sound like a comb when you run your finger up it. As the day warms, I can catch the snoring call of a few leopard frogs. The slough-pumping sound of a nearby American bittern suggests why frogs become quiet when you approach them. Frogs are tasty morsels for so many other creatures.

The trill of the junco, the loud calls of the flickers, the flutelike song of the Hermit thrush remind me to dust off the bird call tapes. There's still time for an annual refresher before the returning bird life is so numerous I get overwhelmed by them all.

On the road, dusty from lack of rain, you can see the tracks of deer and wolves. I don't know if I have ever driven this road and not seen the tracks of either, somewhere along its length. One summer we knew of a cow moose and her calf hanging out along this road. It seems a long time ago, now.

It's amazing the things we will see, if only we will pause and wait a bit. Give it a try. Four minutes. Just four minutes. Four magical minutes, in which we refresh our souls.



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